

What is it like to be Muslim in Thailand?

A case study of Thailand through

Muslim professionals' perspectives

Submitted by Songsiri Putthongchai to the

University of Exeter as a thesis for the degree

of Doctor of Philosophy in Arab and Islamic Studies

In January 2013

This thesis is available for Library use on the understanding that it is copyright material and that no quotation from the thesis may be published without proper acknowledgment.

I certify that all material in this thesis which is not my own work has been identified and that no material has previously been submitted and approved for the award of a degree by this or any other University.

Signature:

Abstract

This dissertation expands the body of research available on the Muslim minority in Thailand, particularly in regard to conflicts in the Lower South. Working within the framework of moderate multiculturalism and secularism, the dissertation seeks to understand how Muslim professionals see the relationship between Islamic representative bodies and the Thai state, the roles of Islamic institutions and their religious conduct in relation to wider Thai society. The fieldwork conducted in 2008 and 2009 shows similarities and differences between Muslim professionals inside and outside of the Lower South in relation to these issues. In general, Muslim professionals support national integration and multiculturalism. In the Lower South in particular, they support national integration on the condition that it supports Muslim identity. Most interviewees believe that Islamic representative bodies play integrative roles. However, this is not seen as beneficial to the Muslim community and improvements are widely desired. Where the government and the representative bodies have not been able to resolve the unrest in the Lower South, local civil society organizations have taken an active peace-making role, with the aim of promoting Muslim identity under the Thai Constitution. This dissertation also examines attitudes to mosques and Islamic education through interviewees' perspectives. The research shows that Muslim professionals expect mosques to perform a community-based role. More specifically, interviewees in the Lower South suggested cooperation between local administrative organizations and mosque committees, whereas those based elsewhere in Thailand recommended that mosques should provide social services inclusive to non-Muslim society. On Islamic education, most wished to see improvements. Some interviewees, mainly outside the Lower South, shared the government's view regarding connections between the unrest in the southernmost provinces and traditional and private Islamic schools, in consideration of which they believed that the government itself should take the leading role in providing Islamic education. On the other hand, interviewees in the Lower South mainly took the view that Islamic school development is obstructed by the unrest which the government has not been able to resolve.. Therefore, their suggestions involved improving secular curricula and introducing more meaningful and integrative religious teachings, aimed at academic excellence.

The research further shows that the religious conduct of Muslim professionals and their perspectives on it are significantly connected to their social environment. While Muslim interviewees both inside and outside the Lower South do not limit themselves to consuming halal-signed food only, those living outside the Lower South, where Muslims are a minority,

showed a greater willingness to compromise in relation to eating and drinking. Most women professionals outside the Lower South do not wear hijabs for justifiable reasons, while virtually all women in the Lower South do. Although most interviewees marry within the Muslim community, in principle they also accept inter-religious marriage. Marriage between Muslims from different sects is viewed as more controversial, although this conviction is held less strongly outside the Lower South. Overall, the interviewees are committed to preserving their Muslim identity, but with less strict trends outside the Lower South. This might well reflect moderate multiculturalism and secularism in Thailand where the identity of religious minorities and the majority Buddhist population are subject to negotiation.

List of Contents

Chapter 1: Introduction	6-47
Chapter 2: Relationship between the Thai State and religion	48-71
Chapter 3: Muslim groups of Thailand	72-95
Chapter 4: The Institution of the Chularajmontri	96-122
Chapter 5: Calling for Lower Southern Autonomy: the lesson learnt from the failure of the institution of the <i>Chularajmontri</i> and the interplay of Islamic education	123-166
Chapter 6: Mosques: inner and outer gaps and ineffectiveness	167-187
Chapter 7: On Piety and Personal Practices	188-210
Chapter 8: Conclusion	211-217
Bibliography	217-243